

6 COVID-19-driven sudden shift to remote teaching: the case of the Languages for the Community Program at the Universidad Nacional del Litoral

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Abstract

The Languages for the Community Program (LCP), one of the units that make up the Language Center at Universidad Nacional del Litoral (UNL), Santa Fe, República Argentina, is an extension service provided to people 17 years of age and older that live in Santa Fe or in neighboring towns, and to UNL students wishing to take language courses other than those offered in their own study programs. Since 1999 when they started, these language courses have been taught in a traditional face-to-face modality. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the way in which the first term in 2020 had to suddenly shift to remote teaching and how this shift was devised, coordinated, delivered, and evaluated in response to the unexpected context provoked by the outbreak of COVID-19. The chapter also reports the changes implemented during the second term according to the results of a satisfaction survey administered to students. Collaborative work, previous expertise, and methodological principles allowed the staff at LCP to offer a quality educational response to this paradigm shift in foreign language teaching and learning.

Keywords: COVID-19, online language teaching, IT, management, Argentina.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Objectives

The objectives of this chapter are the following: (1) report about the sudden changes that had to be implemented in response to the novel context characterized by the advent of the pandemic; (2) analyze the decision-making process of the educational response to lockdown measures; (3) examine the assumptions underpinning the design of the remote program as well as pedagogical and logistics considerations; (4) describe the training and support provided to teaching staff; (5) collect and evaluate feedback; and (6) promote future research actions.

The argumentation is developed from the angle of, respectively, the coordinator of the Extension and Professional Development area at the Language Center and chairperson of the LCP (María del Valle Gastaldi) and a member and advisor of the Extension and Professional Development team (Elsa Grimaldi).

1.2. Institutional context

UNL was founded in 1919 and even though from the very beginning foreign languages were incorporated into the different programs of study, this process was particularly slow. This slowness reflected the spirit of the times, when the national language had great symbolic value associated with national identity and political unity (Cogo & Dewey, 2012). The process speeded up from the early 60s onwards with the almost exclusive incorporation of English. It was only in the late 90s that the university decided to heighten the role of foreign language teaching and learning and, as a result of this decision, a special academic division was created in 1997 – the area of foreign languages – an embryo of the UNL Language Center as it is known today. Very soon, several institutional and academic steps were taken in order to improve the teaching of foreign languages in the different programs taught at UNL. Then, an important extension initiative was launched in 1999 – the LCP – aimed at people 17 years of age and older living in or around Santa Fe and UNL students wishing to take language courses

other than those offered in their own study programs. For over 20 years now, this program has upheld a plurilingual educational perspective offering different language courses to the community. The first languages taught in this program were English, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish as a foreign language, soon followed by French, German, Chinese, Hebrew, Polish, Croatian, Japanese, and Argentine Sign Language.

The courses are organized in graded levels corresponding to the six-level scale described in the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR, [Council of Europe, 2001](#)). Each course has a total of 60 or 40 hours of tuition depending on level and number of students. Moreover, 120-hour full year preparation courses for international exams are also offered as well as conversation courses, and 20-hour courses of English for Specific Purposes. From the very beginning, both general and specific-purpose courses in all languages have been taught within the communicative language teaching framework ([Littlewood, 2011](#)) in the traditional face-to-face modality. Since 2017, blended learning methodologies have been progressively incorporated, such as the development of virtual environments for English and German courses and the online placement test destined to prospective students wishing to join the LCP.

The academic year is divided into two terms, from April to July and from August to November, and a third period for summer intensive courses during February and March. On average, enrollment numbers reach around 1,000 students every term and around 200 students in the summer intensive courses.

2. Decision-making process to go fully online

The first 2020 term was supposed to start on March 30. By that time a new disease, designated as COVID-19 by the World Health Organization, had expanded to every part of the world and in Argentina a strict compulsory lockdown was imposed as from March 20, for two weeks. However, the risk of its spread and the news of its death toll in other countries foretold the prolongation of the lockdown and the strengthening of restrictive sanitary measures.

Consequently, the first decision taken by the authorities of the LCP was to postpone the commencement of classes while analyzing other possibilities. Nevertheless, after considering that the lockdown was to be extended beyond the proposed two weeks, it was decided to turn to remote teaching during the first term, at least. From this moment onwards, a dynamic, expedient consensus was reached thanks to the commitment, interest, and willingness of almost all the stakeholders involved in this process – executive and coordinating staff, clerical personnel and teaching staff – who had to make a paradigm shift and implement eight online foreign language courses in almost no time.

However, there were no data concerning the students' view on this shift and, consequently, it was not certain whether the enrolled students would be willing to accept taking courses under the novel modality. With this purpose, they were offered a free two-week period of online courses, after which they would be able to choose whether to attend the first term or not. Taking into account that during that period students would not pay any fees, free educational web services were adopted. Various video conferencing platforms were employed for the synchronous activities so as to comply with the generally agreed principles of communicative language teaching, namely engaging learners in meaningful interaction and communication in the target language (Richards, 2006). For the asynchronous activities, Google Classroom was selected, a free educational service which can be used as a free learning management system (Pappas, 2015), since it allows sharing files in a collaborative way.

Once this free two-week period was over, about 70% of the enrolled students opted for the new modality. The remaining 30% decided to wait for the return of classroom-based lessons and only 10% of these did so after having taken a few remote lessons, which they found frustrating as a result of connectivity problems and/or lack of technological knowledge. The opportunity was also important for teachers since it allowed them to re-think their practices, acquire new skills, understand what technology integration entails and get appropriate training to face this novel pedagogical context. Last but not least, it is important to mention the invaluable support of the administrative personnel, information technology (IT) technicians, and financial and budget assistants.

Taking all this into account, on April 20 the program officially began the first term with online courses of German, Chinese, Spanish as a foreign language, French, English, Italian, Japanese, and Portuguese, totaling 61 courses, taught by 43 language teachers and remotely attended by over 600 students, about 60% of the usual average attendance.

2.1. Assumptions underpinning the design of the remote program

Within the context of the coronavirus pandemic and the lockdown imposed, a number of assumptions were made as regards the feasibility of turning to remote teaching in a very short time. They were:

- stakeholders would take on an active role during the process;
- teachers would be eager to face the challenge;
- the pandemic would be an exceptional context to try out teachers' beliefs about collaborative decision making, planning and action; and
- students would be grateful for the opportunity of learning languages remotely from the safety of their homes.

Based on these assumptions, the following considerations were made by the LCP staff regarding pedagogical principles, logistics, and teacher development.

2.2. Pedagogical and logistics considerations

Teaching is a complex practice which implies an interweaving of different kinds of specialized knowledge. The Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework model in language teaching ([Mishra & Koehler, 2006](#)) proposes a conceptual framework that integrates the main components of learning environments: content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and technological knowledge. The interaction of these three kinds

of knowledge produces the type of flexible knowledge needed to successfully integrate technology into teaching and learning to make them effective and meaningful. These principles were adopted by the LCP staff when devising the online courses to be delivered. However, the fact that not all teachers had adequate experience with certain technologies was taken into account and, at the same time it was felt that acquiring these skills at such short notice presented a challenge worth taking.

During the first term different platforms were used such as Zoom, Google Meet, WebEx, and Skype in their free versions. However, all of them presented time limitations and not enough resources available to deliver synchronous teaching. For this reason, and after this weakness was particularly pointed out in a students' survey which is referred to below, during the second term the Language Center subscribed to the Zoom platform. This platform was selected for several reasons, e.g. quality of sound, possibility of using 'breakout rooms' that allow splitting a session into different separate sessions, and because it permits delivering synchronous 90-minute lessons. At the same time Google Classroom continued to be used for the asynchronous activities. As regards resources, teachers were encouraged to work with scanned, digitized material and, where possible, e-books. In all cases, and in order to participate fully, each student needed a computer, reliable high-speed internet access, microphones, speakers, and a webcam.

2.3. Training and support

The LCP and the Language Center have always favored continuous professional development through the frequent organization of training workshops and academic meetings. The COVID-19 emergency was no exception; teachers were encouraged to expand their knowledge and skills by taking tutorials and webinars available in social media, organized by UNL and other institutions. Based on queries from teachers, video tutorials were designed by the LCP teachers with broad expertise in technology-based language teaching using the LOOM free software available in Google Chrome. The LCP IT personnel cooperated with them in designing, uploading, and sharing this material, which was later systematized and saved in Google Drive.

3. Assessment

According to the legal framework that supports the LCP courses (RCS UNL 580/13 – RCS UNL109/20), after each successful passing of exams students obtain a certificate issued by UNL accrediting that they have reached the corresponding level. Levels 1 to 9 correlate to CEFR levels A1, A2, B1, B2, and their sublevels.

Turning remote also meant that exams had to be administered online, which meant having to face the challenge of designing tests which guaranteed evaluation objectives, quality, transparency, reliability, and validity. This was particularly difficult concerning the written exams but, in order not to deprive students of the possibility of obtaining their certificates, the following considerations were taken into account:

- the different levels are made up of small groups, with an average of 15 students per class;
- by the end of the term, teachers have a fair knowledge of their students and their academic performance;
- students have a right to be considered trustworthy;
- all written exams are done during a Zoom session which makes them even more transparent;
- the time allotted to complete the written exams is a relevant variable when designing them; and
- oral exams, held a week later, will undoubtedly validate the results of the written exams.

Under the traditional classroom-based modality, written tests have four sections: *listening comprehension, reading comprehension, use of English, and writing*.

Taking into account this particular context, the Moodle platform was adopted for the English written tests and different quiz activities were selected such as matching, multiple choice, embedded answer, or cloze tests that allow summative assessment, for the first three sections. For the writing section the essay type of question was employed which allows students to write on a particular subject according to the task. This is the only section that must be graded manually.

As regards the exams for the other languages taught at LCP, teachers preferred working in Google Classroom and the exams included the four sections but as a downloadable Assignment with an answer sheet that the students had to upload in the specified time. In June and July, oral tests were taken using Zoom, Google Meet, WebEx, or Skype according to the previous selection agreed upon by the teachers and students of the different groups. From December onwards, they will be taken by Zoom only.

Even though detailed statistical data as regards exam results are not included here, it is relevant to mention that almost 90% of the students passed their exams and almost 80% of them got the same or similar marks in both the written and oral tests.

4. Program evaluation

4.1. Teachers' feedback

Teachers' feedback was required and given by frequent interaction but not through a formal questionnaire or survey since it was not advisable to increase the teachers' workload implied by this unexpected opportunity. Most of them felt exhausted but satisfied and grateful for the challenge.

However, it is worth mentioning that it has already been decided to design and conduct a survey by the end of the second term. The aim is to gather teachers' feedback as regards their experience, their needs for further training, and their

interest and availability for the next year in case both modalities still co-exist, which seems most probable.

4.2. Students' feedback

Given the novelty of the remote online proposal and the celerity with which it had to be implemented, very soon the need to evaluate its results emerged. Accordingly, a satisfaction survey was administered to students to know their views and impressions ([supplementary materials](#), Appendix 1). The survey was available during the first week in June and it had a good level of response of almost 70%. The results are summarized below:

- students' general assessment of the proposal was highly positive;
- most students highlighted the professionalism and commitment of teachers; and
- students' assessment of the efficacy of the remote mode for learning the four communicative skills was positive but not highly positive. They rated the effectiveness of online learning in terms of learning how to speak and how to write a text in the target language as weak points to be improved. Nonetheless, the results of the final written and oral exams were much better than expected.

Students were also asked to make suggestions if they had any. The main ones are listed below:

- use a better, more secure platform to avoid inadequate functioning. Some suggested Google Meet or Microsoft Teams but others suggested that the university should provide a platform of its own with security enhancement to avoid privacy risks; and
- increase teacher/students and student/student interactions.

They were also asked to make a comparison between the two modalities (remote and classroom-based). Most of them agreed on the following facts:

- the remote modality is highly recommended under extreme circumstances such as a pandemic;
- it also solves transport difficulties and expenses; and
- it is highly convenient for elderly people though they are a minority, people who suffer health problems or live far from the Language Center.

However, 50% of the students expressed that, under normal circumstances, they preferred the face-to-face modality for the following reasons:

- classroom-based teaching favors face-to-face interactions between teachers and students and among students;
- this modality is better for learning oral skills and communication; and
- students do not have to worry about connectivity issues.

And there were other students (about 24%) who found advantages and disadvantages in the two modalities and suggested a combination of both.

5. After the emergency: the second term

Encouraged by students' responses and teachers' enthusiasm, and compelled by a further prolongation of the lockdown in Argentina, it was decided to continue with the remote modality during the second term, which started on August 18 and finished by the end of November. The enrollment numbers of the first period increased by 50%: 963 students enrolled, grouped in 83 courses of German, Chinese, French, English, Italian, Japanese, Argentine Sign Language, and Portuguese ([Table 1](#)).

Table 1. Enrollment for the 1st and 2nd terms

Language	1st Term	2nd Term
German	43	84
Chinese	7	13
French	20	40
English	462	675
Italian	37	77
Portuguese	10	31
Japanese	3	14
Argentine Sign Language	30	29
Total	612	963

In response to the most important weakness pointed out by students in reference to the first term, the Zoom for Education platform was adopted for all courses, which allows delivering 90-minute synchronous Zoom-based lessons with several advantages, especially concerning speaking. According to [Nation and Newton \(2009\)](#) different kinds of activities are very important in teaching speaking. It is necessary to focus on aspects of speaking such as pronunciation, intonation, fluency, adequate polite language for a specific situation and last but not least tactics for holding the floor of the conversation. Synchronous meetings are a must to guarantee the context for this practice.

Enrollment for this second period was successful not only in terms of number of students but also regarding these students' location ([supplementary materials](#), Appendix 2). Through the new online proposal, the LCP has gone national and international: 89% of the students live in the province of Santa Fe, in the city itself, in nearby towns and in other towns of the province located far from the capital city, 11% of the students are from 12 out of a total of 23 provinces in Argentina and three students are from other countries ([Table 2](#)).

Table 2. Distribution of students according to language and country of origin

Language	Chile	Brazil	Argentina
German	1	0	92
Chinese	0	0	13
French	0	0	56

English	0	1	674
Italian	0	0	78
Japanese	1	0	13
Portuguese	0	0	34
Total	2	1	960

6. Conclusions

UNL, its Language Center and the LCP are educational institutions and service providers and as such they had to give a quick educational response to the community in the context of the pandemic and the lockdown that ensued. Even though taken in haste, the agreed-upon decision of going remote was adopted according to a clear set of goals, expertise, collaborative work, professional development, and effective communication. It should also be remarked that all stakeholders involved believed that it was worthwhile to face the challenge and take the risk.

The favorable results yielded by the satisfaction survey as well as by the increase in enrollment of the second term demonstrate students widely approved of the novel educational experience they went through. Hard data such as attendance, retention and completion rates as well as examination outcomes are good indicators that this non-traditional pedagogic proposal is going in the right direction.

For all these reasons, it can be concluded that remote language teaching is here to stay, even after classroom-based teaching can start again. A future is foreseen in which the two modalities will co-exist. Quoting Rapanta et al. (2020), “the current pandemic can be understood as a catalyst” (p. 941) that will speed up educational change, models, and practices in response to the society of the future.

Consequently, the research agenda on online language learning should move forward and include, among other topics, novel learning contexts and environments, use of mobile devices, and apps. Hockly (2015) claims that this

new research agenda should also include “learner engagement and interaction, student self-organization, instructor presence (or lack of it), course design, and particularly, the issue of assessment and evaluation” (p. 6). Accordingly, the UNL Language Center is planning to set up a research group which will bring together researchers committed to understanding the novel challenges faced by language teaching in the context of a post-pandemic world.

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8. Supplementary materials

<https://research-publishing.box.com/s/3r7k5j0eocuyukgvoqh8p62v9x6ieori>

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